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Owning the problem: Media portrayals of overweight dogs and the shared determinants of the health of human and companion animal populations

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Weight-related health problems have become a common topic in Western mass media. News-coverage has also extended to overweight pets, particularly since 2003 when the U.S. National Academy of Sciences announced that obesity was also afflicting co-habiting companion animals in record numbers. To characterize and track views in popular circulation on causes, consequences and responsibilities vis-à-vis weight gain and obesity, in pets as well as in people, this study examines portrayals of overweight dogs that appeared from 2000 through 2009 in British, American and Australian mass media. The ethnographic content analysis drew inspiration from the literature in population health, animal-human relationships, communication framing and the active nature of texts in cosmopolitan societies. Three main types of media articles about overweight dogs appeared during this period: 1) reports emphasizing *facts and figures*; 2) stories emphasizing *personal prescriptions* for dog owners, and 3) *societal critiques*. To help ordinary people make sense of canine obesity, media articles often highlight that dogs share the lifestyle of their human companion or owner, yet the implications of shared social and physical environments is rarely considered when it comes to solutions. Instead, media coverage exhorts people who share their lives with overweight dogs to ‘own the problem’ and, with resolve, to normalize their dog’s physical condition by imposing dietary, exercise and relationship changes, thereby individualizing culpability rather than linking it to broader systemic issues.

Keywords: Companion animals; Media; Narrative analysis; Obesity; Public understanding

Introduction

In 2001 the US Surgeon General issued an urgent 'Call for Action' to quell what he termed an emerging epidemic of obesity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001). This report not only incited a rapid escalation in research on human obesity, but also galvanized public, political and media interest in the issue (Kersh and Morone 2005; Oliver and Lee 2005). And yet recent expressions of concern among researchers and in the media about the health effects of excess weight have not been confined to human populations, but also the increasing incidence of obesity amongst our co-habiting companion animals. In 2003, a committee of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences reported that one in four dogs and cats worldwide were overweight (National Research Council 2003), which helped to lend a pet angle to global media coverage of weight gain and obesity. Armed with this report and related findings (McGreevy, et al. 2005; Lund, Armstrong, Kirk and Klausner 2006), veterinary opinion leaders and animal welfare advocates have managed to harness media interest in obesity—in concert with their enduring fascination with matters animal—thus raising the public profile of an emerging pet health issue. This paper addresses the mass media's role in connecting weight gain in dogs with human activity and social organization. Following on from studies of the influence of comparative metaphors and analogies on lay-people's perceptions of human obesity (Barry, et al. 2009), it is likely that media portrayals of overweight pets have the potential to have an effect on the general public's understanding of and engagement with the determinants of health — in canine as well as in human populations.

Pets and people – shared lives, shared environments, shared health concerns

Pet animals occupy an important place in many Western societies (Franklin 1999). Almost 50% of households in North America, Europe and Australasia include one or more animal companions. Almost half of these animals — and their owners — will see a veterinarian at least annually. These interactions between humans, animals and health care providers have effects that extend beyond the well-being of individual pets. People's ways of thinking about pet health cannot be understood without reference to how they think about human health — their own health but also the health of others (family, friends and entire populations). When it comes to pets, people compare and contrast. Partly they are actively encouraged to do so, for example in veterinary clinics. But more generally people make comparisons because they regard their pets as beings that resemble humans — physically as well as emotionally or spiritually. People will often go to extraordinary lengths to care for a pet, for example, by seeking specialist veterinary services and by rearranging their schedules to follow through on veterinary advice to administer medication twice or more per day. While not all pet owners are prepared or equipped financially to provide the highest standards of veterinary healthcare, expectations regarding pet health are shifting — not least for recognized health risk such as over-feeding and obesity.

Previous studies of human-canine interactions vis-à-vis weight gain and obesity have sought to establish whether overweight people tend to have overweight dogs, to predict which people over-feed their dogs, and to identify enablers and barriers to regular dog-walking (Cutt, et al. 2007; Nijland, Stam and Seidell 2010; Rohlf, et al. 2010). Our approach differs, in that we look to media coverage as a site that amplifies particular ways of thinking about why so many people and dogs in Western societies are overweight,

and what can or should be done in response. There is an extensive literature on obesity and health in human populations where the demonstrated root-causes now include genetic factors, diet, levels of physical activity and how an individual's behaviour on these dimensions is mediated by their social and economic circumstances (McLaren 2007; James 2008). Against this background our central premise is that the rising incidence of weight-related health problems in co-habiting human and canine populations are related, due to socio-cultural and economic forces that structure people's everyday lives and that influence how people exercise agency, including how people regard and interact with dogs.

Health News, Animal-Human Interest Stories and Active Texts

Media content can reflect prominent social concerns and changes in the nature and tone of popular discourses. As well as showing that 'something is happening' in a society, news-reports can have recursive effects. For example numerous studies indicate that the media plays a prominent role in how the public understand issues relating to health (Brodie, et al. 2003; Wang and Gantz 2007). In essence, media reports are forms of communication that inform people's knowledge and perceptions, and thereby can also inform their actions and reactions. As an issue emerges and then becomes widely viewed as a significant health problem, individuals rely on media depictions, political filters and personal experiences to gather and synthesize information (Entman and Herbst 2001). Explanations provided by professionals and institutions tend to be prominent in media coverage of health issues, and may be cited authoritatively or criticized. For example, media coverage of the emergence of Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus-aureus* (MRSA) has acted as a 'bridge' between medical findings and public perceptions, entrenching the notion that mismanagement of the UK's National Health Service has contributed to the problem of this 'hospital superbug' (Washer and Joffe 2006). Notably—as with many recently emerged and important health issues (Blue and Rock 2011)—the MRSA situation and media profile in the UK also has a pet angle. Aside from expressions of concern about over-prescription of antibiotics by veterinarians, there were also news-reports that individualized the story around the fate of a prominent companion animal. When a dog named 'Bella' contracted MRSA and died shortly after undergoing surgery in 2004, her actress owner also blamed organizational routines and hospital mismanagement in the veterinary context, for giving her animal this infection (Gardiner 2009). This situation led to the creation of a not-for-profit foundation whose activities include hosting a popular website that provides information about MRSA in pets as well as in people, including reposts of media coverage on the topic.

Conceptually and methodologically, this paper builds on previous work on animal-human interest stories in cosmopolitan societies (Podberscek 1994; Franklin and White 2001). Like reports of new cancer risks or medical breakthroughs, variations of 'man-bites-dog' stories are a news staple (Hughes 1940). Uncanny, endearing or horrifying tales about pets appear in the media almost every day. We posit that popular interest in dogs and obesity combine in media coverage, and that such news-reporting conveys information and perspectives that ordinary people readily apply to themselves, to their friends and families, and to human populations more generally. Following on from Foucault as well as from Gramsci, the study of texts can provide insights into how activity at one place and time relate to what

has occurred and continues to occur elsewhere (Smith 1999; Mykhalovskiy 2003). We thus regard our media corpus as the result of — and impetus for — sets of social practices. This way of conceiving of texts is less concerned with manifest content and more concerned with how particular texts originate from, represent and help to shape everyday life through their powers of persuasion, and/or by inciting disagreement and the production of further texts and other activities and discourses.

Regarding the co-incidence throughout the Western world of health problems linked to being overweight in human and canine populations, our concern with active texts and with animal-human interest stories more specifically is germane because people *do* a great deal with, for and on behalf of these animals. They buy toothbrushes for their dogs, sleep with them, carry around photos of them in their wallets, criticize the behavior of other people's dogs, and donate money, time, or both to animal welfare organizations. The everyday ways in which people go about caring for animals means that pet care is a key way in which people may come to understand and to engage with health science. From this vantage point, whether and how newspapers report on fat dogs and on fatness among dogs may matter a great deal. And yet it is difficult to measure and describe how media reports effect the practices of the reading public. With this caveat in mind, our aim is twofold. First, we investigate how the causes, consequences, meanings and solutions to weight-related issues in pet animal populations are construed in media coverage, and then we consider how this reporting connects with issues pertaining to human affairs and human health.

Methods

Data Sources and Collection

A search of *EBSCOhost Newspaper Source* (U.S.) for articles published between 2000 and 2009 containing the terms (dog* or canine* or pet*) and (overweight or obes* or fat) was undertaken, which led to identifying a total of 213 unique articles about overweight dogs. This database covers a wide selection of national and regional newspapers in Britain, Australia and North America as well as transcripts from several U.S. broadcasters, including *CBS News*, *FOX News* and *NPR*. The 213 articles were downloaded as full-text, and then manually catalogued as to their year and national origin.

Data Analysis

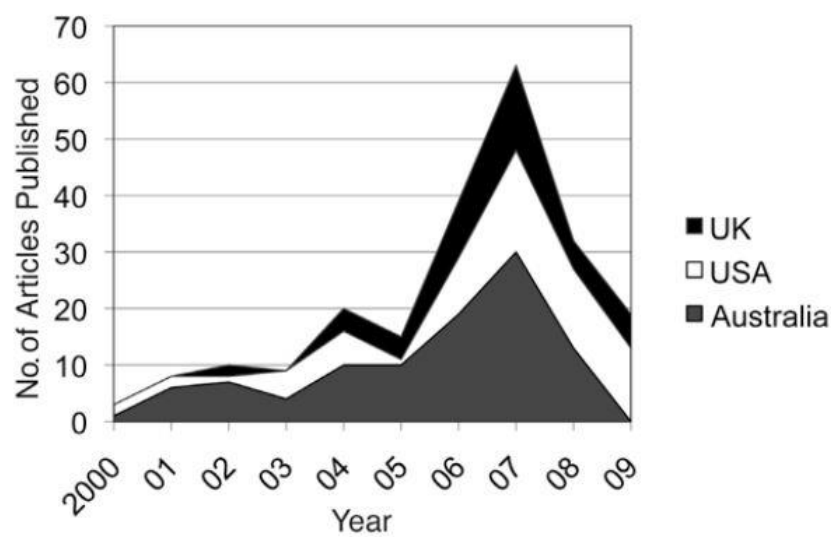
This study is based on ethnographic content analysis (ECA). With this method, researchers seek to interpret text and images within the context of their use (Altheide 1987; Krippendorff 2004). Drawing on both numerical and narrative data, the aim is to provide rich descriptions and comparisons of the ways in which specific forms of communication provide causal interpretations, promote particular viewpoints and moral evaluations, and provide prescriptive solutions. ECA is particularly useful as a means to elucidate patterns in how issues are 'anchored' and 'framed'. Any attempt to describe and explain a new phenomenon such as an emerging burden of disease must rely upon analogies, comparisons and metaphors. Reporters often seek to 'anchor' emerging issues in terms and concepts that are familiar to the reader to make them easier to understand — the media coverage of SARS frequently comparing the epidemic to the Spanish Influenza of 1918 is a pertinent example (Moscovici

2000; Washer 2004). Once anchored in familiar terms and events, different types of information and perspectives are emphasized at the expense of others. Some elements are ‘framed in’ while others are ‘framed out.’ In essence, communicative frames a) *define problems*, b) *diagnose causes*, c) provide some *normative assessment* of the situation and d) *suggest solutions and remedies* (Entman 1993, 52). In combination, these comparisons and pieces of salient information serve to provide meaning, tell us what to do, and provide an account of who is at risk, who is ‘other’, and, ultimately, who is to blame. A given communicative utterance or text may not contain all four elements, or not explicitly, but even a rather small corpus on a particular topic is likely to exhibit framing patterns and these frames are likely to have been ‘borrowed.’ With these concepts and textual relationships in mind, our analysis of the 213 articles on overweight dogs proceeded through several cycles of immersion and crystallization of insights — a research process comprised of repeated readings and comparisons across and between news-markets, discussions amongst the authors, periods of testing of alternate explanations and then re-immersion within the research materials (Borkan 1999; LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

Results

Media interest in overweight dogs had emerged by 2002, had built momentum by 2004, peaked in 2007, and had tapered off by 2009 (see Figure 1). The peak in 2007 can be attributed to a constellation of events that attracted interest across the news-markets examined. These include: the release of diet pills for dogs; a series of high profile animal welfare prosecutions involving obese animals; and a number of global recalls of popular brands of pet foods. Differences in magnitude across the three marketplaces are evident, with the most interest shown in Australia (which tended to report on events in the other markets), followed by the more inward-looking US, and then by the UK.

Figure 1: A “stacked” table of year by year and national differences in the number of articles addressing the issue of canine obesity published in our corpus of newspapers from the UK, Australia, and the USA (2000–2009).



It is notable that most of the news reporting we examined used puns in the headlines and news-banners. This is fairly typical of animal stories and most other human-interest pieces in newspapers. However, very rarely was the jocular tone carried into the body of the article. Instead our analysis distilled three patterns in how the media has chosen to use the animal-interest genre to frame the complex issues surrounding the increasing prominence of canine obesity. Media reports tended to focus upon one of the following: *facts and figures*, *personal prescriptions*, and *societal critiques*. It is important to emphasize that these tropes did not necessarily occur in sequence or remain entirely distinct. As early as 2004, for example, *societal critiques* occasionally appear in direct response to the *facts and figures*. Yet over time, the meaning of an increasing incidence of overweight dogs developed into a recognizable discourse, one that emphasized individual responsibility.

Look! Another Obesity Epidemic

The first type of story to appear centered on ‘facts and figures’ and were typically sparked by a statistical study or survey. A university researcher, scientific institution, pet health insurance company or animal welfare charity had circulated a media release to publicize their findings, and access to one of the researchers or a prominent member of the organization was also provided as an expert interview subject. For example the following report appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph*, the largest-circulation weekend paper in Sydney, Australia:

A BALLOONING obesity rate among Australians is spreading to our four-footed friends, latest figures show. More than 40 per cent of dogs and 20 per cent of cats are overweight or obese, the RSPCA says. Animal experts claim Australia's inactive lifestyle and poor diet is killing our furry friends. They are dying of heart disease, diabetes and arthritis -- the same weight-related disorders as humans. ... The RSPCA recommends walking dogs for around 30 minutes each day and following a healthy diet. (Sexton 2004, p. L34)

The same ‘facts and figures’ type of story appeared in British and U.S. media, heralding the existence of a ‘second wave’ obesity epidemic occurring in pet populations: *The best solution to overweight pets and overweight pet owners is the same: Eat less and exercise more.* (“Our doggies, ourselves” 2006, p. D10) The apparent co-incidence of a human obesity is mentioned prominently to provide context and to anchor the story for readers. These articles consistently feature a ‘why should we care’ component, which highlights health risks for overweight pets as a prelude to underscoring a need for self-reflection followed by immediate action on the part of animal owners. What seems to unify the recommendations offered in ‘fact and figure’ reports is the underlying supposition that dog owners were unaware of the problem and the risks it posed, so that correcting deficiencies in knowledge would be enough to spur them to “*ensure daily exercise, limit food intake.*” This type of recommendation was often followed by a pointed observation related to the owner’s health, such as “*they could do worse than apply the same regimen to themselves*” (Hamilton 2004, p. 9).

Pets Pay the Price for Individuals' Failings

Whereas '*facts and figures*' articles tended to be brief, to center on statistical findings, and to end with exhortations for dog owners, the second variety of media articles in our corpus emphasize '*personal prescriptions*'. These accounts of canine obesity step inside the facts and figures to look in greater depth at causes and solutions. This type of article typically cites both veterinarians and owners. Articles typically begin by citing owners, who attest to their previous ignorance, guilt or frustration at the weight and overall state of their dog. Veterinarians — either a local practitioner or one who works for a university or animal welfare organization — then recount their experiences of the canine obesity epidemic and reiterate the nature of the risks posed by excessive weight for canine health. In addition, veterinary sources often give their opinion of the behavior and choices of an archetypical owner of an overweight animal. The co-incidence of human and animal obesity in the same household is often used to make a number of different types of claims, such as: "*overweight people inflict their poor lifestyle habits on their pets.*" (Bee 2005, p. 8) Alternatively, there are occasionally statements from experts in line with what Bourdieu (1995) described as a 'shared way of being' or *habitus*, but without reference to hierarchy in human populations, such as this observation in *USA Today*:

Many pets lounge around the house all day and then join other members of the family for snacks in front of the tube at night." (Fackelmann 2003, p. L9)

A series of contributing factors are usually mentioned, which often included: the calorie-rich nature of modern pet foods; an escalation in 'treat culture,' (Miller 1998, 40-49) that is, the tendency for each shopping trip to include the purchase of small extravagances directed toward a particular member of the household (dogs, in this case); longer periods of time spent away from the home for paid employment; and passive pastimes among dog owners, such as the television example given above. Only very occasionally are demographic changes (e.g., single-person households) and urbanization (e.g., confined apartment living) mentioned as being contributors to the increasing numbers of overweight dogs. Notably, attempts to tie the causal elements described above together were rare in our corpus. The stories are anchored by comparisons between the every-day routines of individual pets and the presumed consequences of owner lifestyles.

Within these prescriptive articles, the narrative tends to shift between tales of unhealthy love and unthinking neglect or cruelty. The cause of excess weight in pet animals is then individualized — using some or all of these normative elements — as a deficit of the owner in two slightly different ways. Either owners are presumed to be deficient in their knowledge about diet, physical activity and what constitutes a healthy body condition for a dog; or they are presumed to be deficient in the type of relationship that they have allowed to form with their dog. In both instances, the problem is construed as a moral failing that requires behavioral discipline and control on the part of individual owners. This focus on owner control and responsibility, or the lack of it, is usually given a veterinary imprimatur. For example, a veterinarian interviewed by the *Charleston Gazette* (U.S.) of West Virginia was at pains to point out who was the responsible party:

[W]e control the situation ... Dogs and cats can't open the refrigerator. They can't have a midnight snack unless you provide it. (Morgan 2006)

Overweight dogs are sometimes granted considerable agency in this dynamic, to the point of being described as manipulative, demanding and even glutinous individuals, particularly in the Australian media. For one *Herald Sun* (AUS) reporter, as an example, devious pets were even deliberately: *emotionally blackmailing their gullible owners for an extra snack and are becoming obese in the process.* (Trumble 2006, p. 35) These types of stories also serve to account for the intransigence of canine obesity to scientifically-designed diet dog-food. The result is that rather than a lack of knowledge, the central problem is now construed as owner psychology. Overarching these assessments of owner conduct, the message is — in short — that some people are so ill-disciplined that they are giving 'human' diseases to their dogs. Once blame has been assigned to individual owners, the 'prescription' is to modify the animals eating, exercise it regularly, and take steps to redress any pathological power-relations in human-dog interactions. The key message is that these animals are paying for the failings of individuals: their ignorance, weakness, laziness, overindulgence or combinations thereof.

Pills for Podgy Pets – all a Step too Far

The third and final variety of story in our corpus explores the implications of a canine obesity epidemic for the Western way of life. These articles comprise either satirical communiqués or general commentaries. The causal account offered is not about individuals but society as a whole, yet with little or no reference to social inequality. The problem is construed as pathological over-consumption. Consequently, these articles use the story of companion animal obesity as an anchor or exemplar in order to make broader comments on scientific, legislative, or business reactions to the pet animal weight 'crisis'. Yet in the end, the preferred solution is individual behavioral change. An editorial in the *New York Times* exemplifies this evolving trope:

It's obviously time for a war on pet gluttony. Perhaps a nation that stashes its prized pets in canine day-care centers, sends them to doggie psychiatrists and buries them in special cemeteries will rise to the challenge by establishing health clubs for pets with special trainers. Alternatively, the human couch potatoes who contribute to this problem could put down the report, get the leash and take Fido for a run. ("Porky Pets" 2003, p. 18)

Normative assessments can then be made about the part being played by one or more institutions in escalating or responding to the situation. As an illustration by the end of 2005 a features writer at *The Times* (U.K.) professed to be tiring of the 'spin-cycle' following the release of yet another survey and press release from an animal healthcare provider, in this case the *Chartered Society of Physiotherapists* (CSP). In Alan Coren's Christmas message, he notes:

Eighty-one percent of canine Britons, declared the CSP this week, are obese ... This survey has me worried, as surveys invariably do. That is what surveys are for ... Hang on I hear 23 per cent of my readership fretfully cry, what about our beloved moggies. Oh do leave off: you of all pet lovers know that

cats are canny, circumspect self-preservationists ... Unless, of course, they happen to live with an animal dumb enough to put up a big wobbly tree and hang bright dangly balls all over it. (Coren 2005, p. 17)

Aside from the examples of consumerist exasperation and survey fatigue provided above, discourse surrounding the issue of companion animal obesity has also been used as an anchor from which to target: the intrusive role of state legislation (Derbyshire 2008); and the anthropomorphism and sentimentality of modern human-pet relationships (Harper 2007). The apparent aim of anchoring these opinion pieces on overweight dogs is to raise the question: is more than companion animal health at risk from these developments? Although the column or opinion piece rarely provides an answer to this existential enquiry, they rarely resist positing a need to return to commonsense solutions. As much as these articles tend to point to a systemic context for canine obesity, blame is still individualized. Any gesture towards distal over proximal causation was framed as a 'step too far.'

As the decade progressed, the issue of canine obesity became intertwined and began to reciprocally shape the concerns of veterinarians, the pet food industry, animal welfare organizations, and pharmaceutical companies. By end of the decade, the terse expression "sedentary lifestyles" often substitutes for any discussion of the shared social and structural determinants of obesity, and implicitly becomes a short-hand code for the "busyness" and "laziness" of contemporary dog-owning populations. It is notable that during the period under study, the issues and agendas that activated media coverage of canine obesity differed somewhat by country. For example, the U.S.-media placed far more importance than the UK or Australian coverage on nutrition and commercial pet-food. This media focus was already present when, in early 2007, a global recall of *Hills*® products heightened concerns about the regulation and ingredient sources of the pet food industry. Although the *Hills*® recall was never linked directly with canine obesity, it would seem that news coverage surrounding tainted pet-food began to influence the content and tone of stories about canine obesity in U.S. news-reports. Furthermore, caring for an overweight dog sometimes occasioned discussion of human diets and the food industry. A Ms Newell summed up the nub of this issue for the *Dallas Morning News*: "*I don't have perfect eating habits, either ... How am I supposed to expect my dog to?*" (Menzer 2007)

Whereas the media in the U.S. and U.K. tend to focus on local developments, the results of British surveys, legislative amendments and animal welfare cases — as well as American Insurance Company reports and pharmaceutical innovations — invariably elicited a response from the Australian media. Nevertheless, these developments are only ever used to provide context, because, in the words of Dr Hugh Wirth, the problem of pet obesity in Australia "*begins and ends with the owner*". (Skotnicki 2004, p. 32) Consequently, the focus remains on describing and evaluating human-animal interactions and, ultimately, animal owners. In contrast, in the U.K., the story of the unfolding canine epidemic becomes coupled with coverage of the legal and legislative activities and agendas of its main animal welfare organization, the *Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty toward Animals*, or RSPCA. Notable events included high-profile prosecutions of owners who had failed to take steps to manage the weight of their morbidly-obese pets. In the UK, canine obesity came to be framed explicitly as an issue of animal welfare. Indeed, "fat dogs" become the central focus in media depictions of amendments to the British Animal Welfare Act (Derbyshire 2008). The British newspapers leave little unexplored, reporting on

everything from the high levels of anxiety amongst the owners of overweight animal who fear punitive action to anger amongst dog lovers who are incensed at the number of animals sacrificed during development, testing and registration of any possible pharmaceutical solutions.

In addition to the *Hills*® recall of 2007, another important development in the same year contributed directly to media coverage of overweight dogs. In January 2007, the multinational pharmaceutical company *Pfizer*® announced FDA approval for *Slentrol*®, a weight-loss medication for dogs. The drug — an appetite suppressant — was explicitly marketed as being a useful tool for veterinarians and animal owners to gain control of a dog's weight when diet modification and increased exercise could not be implemented successfully. In many ways a publicist's dream, the news of a 'diet pill for dogs' attracted worldwide attention. Notably, the Australian media coverage of the new drug remained focused on the human-animal relationship, and the responsibility and relative agency of owners to make the right choices for their pets. In one instance the drug was described in an Australian paper as "*a cop-out for dog owners*" who were too lazy to commit to feeding and exercising their dog more appropriately (Lallo 2007). By comparison, in the U.S., despite the personal endorsement of the head of the animal division of the FDA, news of the drug activated further reflection upon the state of American society. As other papers described the ready-made market and potential uses of the canine medication, an editor at South Dakota's *Aberdeen American News* opined:

"The development of diet pills for dogs should be a real eye opener to all of us. Our society has become increasingly reliant on quick fixes for everything ... It is time for Americans to start retaking control of their lives." ("Dogs don't need diet pills, need disciplined care" 2007)

In the U.K, meanwhile, the introduction of a weight loss drug for dogs was framed by an existing discourse on owner neglect. In fact the RSPCA — largely responsible for generating the data that established the existence of a canine obesity epidemic — opposed the use of a canine weight-loss drug, so as to prevent it from being used to disguise more pressing animal welfare issues. What these differences in the coverage of *Slentrol*® indicate is that in the U.K., canine obesity is most likely to be considered a moral and personal failing of the owner, requiring the existence of punitive animal welfare legislation for extreme cases and to serve as a deterrent. In Australia, the condition is indicative of an owner who needs further education to establish appropriate relationships around food and to encourage healthy human-pet interactions. In the U.S. — where the drug received a less hostile reaction from veterinary professionals — owning a fat dog was construed in media sources as indicative of a loss of control which requires careful consideration of consumption patterns. As the advocates, critics and cynics described above invariably pointed out, with a pharmaceutical intervention, the appearance of normalcy can, if necessary, be restored but without rooting out the pathogenesis.

Discussion

Historical studies indicate that concerns about animal welfare mirror or even foreshadow broader social concerns (Turner 1980). In other words, studying the history of animal welfare has proved to be a way of studying deeply-rooted values, structures and tensions (Tester 1991). In this paper we adopt a similar

approach to over-weight dogs. More precisely we have analyzed the problematization of fatness through the lens of newspaper accounts of canine obesity. The main reason why we think that these media portrayals are of consequence is that we view such texts as socially active. In other words, newspaper stories not only reflect particular ways of thinking, they also imply particular ways of understanding and reacting — in the act of reading, but also in other spheres of activity. In much the same way prominent scientific and media discourses around obesity have been shown to be shaping how Canadian youth conceive of the relationship between people's body-type and their health status (Rail, Holmes and Murray 2010), the news-stories in our corpus on canine weight might induce some people to speculate on the psychological fitness and exercise habits of others, thus influencing social interactions.

Weight gain and obesity in human populations consistently 'anchored' the media coverage in our corpus, yet differences and frank social inequalities in the distribution of weight status were invariably 'framed out' while individual behavior was 'framed in' as the preferred solution and a moral obligation. Even when societal causes received acknowledgement, moral responsibility remained firmly vested in individuals. Medicalizing problems can sometimes absolve people of blame for sickness, but not in this case. Only those capable of resisting powerful societal forces seem to be appropriate candidates for dog ownership, according to these media portrayals, at a time when a growing body of evidence suggests that dogs can promote health in urbanized populations. While some articles mentioned causal factors such as urban design and television-viewing, none emphasized policy reforms or community development as solutions. Even in the handful of news-reports in the sample promoting the health benefits of walking the dog, the prescription was that individuals must own their pets — and thereby their own — weight-related problems. Yet plausible interventions that could promote canine as well as human health include: dog-walking clubs (to help owners to build social networks and to enable non-owners to share in the health benefits of dog-walking), telecommuting (to encourage people to walk a dog during off-peak hours of the day, which could also help to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution), improved lighting in streets and parks (to make it easier for people to walk a dog in the evening), preferred zoning near workplaces for dog daycare programs (to allow people to walk a dog over lunch, for example), and allowing dogs on public transit (so that dogs and their owners could walk at least part of the way to workplaces).

Ethnographic content analysis is explicitly and reflexively attuned to accounting for social relations that help to shape texts as well as their influence in practice (Altheide 1987). This emphasis on social relations and practices is important because media coverage does not exist in isolation but instead is actively and iteratively interpreted in light of other trends, news and events. For our purposes, the most important corollary is the rising incidence of weight-related health problems in human populations. While we have discerned patterns in source types and main messages in our corpus, we have not attempted to isolate or quantify these differences in any precise way. Our intent has been to examine notions in popular circulation about health from a novel angle — overweight dogs — not to measure their frequency. In any case, we found that the media accounts consistently individualized responsibility for weight-related health problems in both dogs and people.

Human-Animal comparisons

Media research on recent infectious epidemics provides a number of interesting comparisons, especially as these stories often have a prominent animal angle. Examinations of the response of British newspapers to newly-emerged diseases such as SARS and MRSA points to frames in which the risk of catching these conditions is externalized by linking disease origins and blame to “others”. While the threat of SARS soon became something that ‘filthy’ Chinese householders face, Peter Washer finds that aside from descriptions of superbugs as “nature’s revenge” for the modern way of living, media reports about MRSA eventually tend not to focus on the origin of the condition, but upon the management practices of the British healthcare system deemed to be responsible for its spread (Washer 2004; Washer and Joffe 2006). A similar trope emerges in Washer’s (2006) subsequent examination of representations of mad-cow disease in British newspapers. Similar to canine obesity, in UK media coverage of BSE and MRSA, there is not an immediate or obvious external “other” to blame. Pointedly, in media coverage of non-infectious epidemic amongst a co-habiting pet animal population, the “others” held responsible are individual owners. The spread of the condition is portrayed as a socially-mediated process that afflicts dogs owned by problematic types of people. This species jump means that we have veterinary epidemiological data being used in animal-interest stories to support causal claims and normative assertions as to obesogenic attributes of the values, living standards and choices of certain segments of the human population. In these terms the only difference between obesity in owners and their companion animals is the presumed ability of humans to restrain themselves, and exercise choice on the behalf of dependent others.

Precisely because dogs occupy a different social position than that of a rational, informed and autonomous consumers, it is striking how closely our findings resemble results from survey-based research on public perceptions of overweight and obese children. Investigations of public perceptions in Australia (Covic, Roufeil and Dziurawiec 2007) and in North America (Evans, et al. 2005; Potestio, et al. 2008) indicate that most citizens understand obesity to have complex causes. Even so, they place more importance on the parents, food, and sedentary pastimes in determining the incidence of over-weight children than on structural or systemic factors. Thus, their preferred remedy is parental action. Similarly, media and professional discourses of neglect and moral failure are currently evolving in the U.K. in relation to the parents of overweight children (Viner, et al. 2010). And yet the individualization of culpability is at odds with current thinking amongst the scientific and public health community about root causes (Foresight Report 2007; Maziak, Ward and Stockton 2008). As the medical sociologist Regina Lawrence (2004) identifies, the overarching distinction between ‘behavioral’ and ‘environmental’ stories about obesity is that they either ‘individualize’ blame, or contextualize excessive body-weight as a ‘systemic’ problem. Whether the focus is on individuals or their context has important implications for any normative assessments, public opinions about policy prescriptions, and attempts at intervention (Saguy and Almeling 2008).

Conclusions

How issues are framed in public discussions matters. Media reports are not a simple neutral account but are socially active. A newspaper story might induce someone to take the time and effort to prepare their own pet food, speculate on the diet and exercise habits of others, or volunteer for an animal welfare charity, and influence in what capacity. What we see in the media coverage of canine obesity is the use of the animal-interest stories to communicate ideas about consumption, care, responsibility and their relationship to excess weight in urban 'sedentary' populations. It is notable that while systemic factors and environmental contexts are considered to be causal contributors the owner's (in)ability to change a lack of time and/or space to exercise; animal by-laws; and perceptions of neighbourhood safety are uniformly downplayed in the media. When it comes to the causes and consequences of canine obesity, the main message is that individual owners need to own the problem. The proof of the owner's control and success is in the pudding, so to speak, of their dog's weight. These types of prescriptive assertions lead to the most surprising finding of our study. Media depictions commonly use connections and correlations in environmental context between people and pets to anchor stories on canine obesity, but the possible implications of this shared health risk remain almost entirely unexamined when it comes to solutions. Instead it is the animal owner's character and preferences that must be called to account for a population-wide problem that crosses class structures, cultures, and for those animals who live amongst us, it would seem, species. As a point of reflection on how we conceptualize intersections and interactions between human and companion health and welfare, if news-reporting conveys information that ordinary people apply to themselves and those around them, individualizing culpability for canine obesity may have broader political effects. At a time when public health researchers struggle to raise the public profile of structural influences on weight-related problems in human populations, this evolving 'animal story' may reinforce the notion that excess weight in owners, their pet animals, or both, is indicative of a personal failure and low moral worth. In turn, this way of framing suggests that the only solution is to call for greater individual discipline, which, if needed, can be aided by a clinically orientated intervention.

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